

THOMAS MERTON AND BRAZIL

"North America...lacks the intense fervor and tropical fecundity of Brazil...Brazil, which is also Africa, which palpitates with the music and simplicity of Africa, which smiles with the grin of the Congo and laughs with the playful innocence of Portugal."

...Thomas Merton, Preface to OBRAS COMPLETAS I (1958)

The first Merton work which appeared in Brazil was a translation of THE SEVEN STOREY MOUNTAIN in 1952. Since that time he has been read and, though the extent of his influence is hard to gauge, influential.

Merton had an intense and continuing interest in Latin America, dating at least from his short trip to Cuba in 1940. Though his interest in Spanish-speaking Latin America and his involvement with Spanish poets may have been better known and more publicized, he seems to have been equally interested in and fascinated by Brazil.

He corresponded widely with Brazilians: with Benedictine monk, Fr. Timoteo Amoroso Anastacio; with his translator, Sr. Emmanuel de Souza e Silva; with the Brazilian poet, Alceu Amoroso Lima, who visited Merton at Gethsemani; and others. Part of the message which Merton attempted to convey to Latin America, including Brazil, was that the United States needed to adopt a new policy toward Latin America, a policy which would reflect an awareness of the rich culture and heritage which Merton found indicated throughout the area. He wrote in THE SECULAR JOURNAL: "One is permitted to wonder if the time has not come for the United States to treat Latin America as an equal, and not as a kind of colony that owes us nothing but respect and gratitude, no matter how we behave toward it."

Another part of the message which Merton tried to convey to Brazil (and to other areas) was that we can all be aware, we can all be involved, even if we do not travel. In fact, Merton insisted that awareness may be heightened by remaining aloof, by living the contemplative life. He said in his Preface to OBRAS COMPLETAS I:

"In the silence of the countryside and the forest, in the cloistered solitude of my monastery, I have discovered the whole Western Hemisphere. Here I have been able, through the grace of God, to explore the New World, without traveling from city to city, without flying over the Andes or the Amazon, stopping one day here, two there, and then continuing on. Perhaps if I had traveled in this manner, I should have seen nothing: those who travel most generally see the least. It seems to me that I have heard the voice of all the hemisphere in the silence of my monastery, a voice that speaks from the depths of my being with a clarity at once magnificent and terrible: as if I had in my heart...the intolerably mysterious jungles of the Amazon... Oh, my brothers and sisters of the South... we are already one in our love of truth, our passion for freedom, and our adoration of the Living God."

Though Merton's influence is immeasurable, we do know that he has been translated and widely read in Brazil. There are hints that his message has been heard and grasped by many Brazilians. Jefferson Barros, a young Brazilian author and political activist, attributed a major role in his intellectual development to Merton's influence. In an interview

in JORNAL DO BRASIL, a Rio de Janeiro newspaper, in September 1979, Barros remarked that Merton had taught him that one could be in a monastery, could be silent and isolated, and still be aware and involved.

In typical fashion, however, Merton did not feel that one could be ignorant *and* aware. Merton tended to set himself a rigorous program of reading and study for any subject in which he was interested. After years of planning to study Portuguese, he finally turned his attention to learning the language in 1968, the year of his death. He filled pages of what he called PORTUGUESE NOTEBOOK with Portuguese grammar and vocabulary. And he developed a reading list, a collection of books on Brazil so that he might know it, so that he might be aware, even without leaving Gethsemani. We give that list, Merton's attempt to study and know Brazil, here.



Thomas Merton with his friend Alceu Amoros Lima and son at Gethsemani

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